**‘I don’t have nightmares anymore’: Exposure to arts and culture as a way of alleviating emotional distress in children**

As part of my PhD field-study research into the emotional impact of UK based theatre company Theatre Alibi’s performance on primary-aged children I met Trent, a nine-year old boy with emotional difficulties. Prior to the performance of *The Boy who climbed into the Moon* (2018) Trent sat quietly in the classroom looking anxious and nervous. His teacher explained that Trent hated puppets, masks and performances and therefore, as the performance featured puppets, thought he would be reluctant to watch the performance which was in the school hall. The teacher was correct; Trent left the performance within the first two minutes. However, he was intrigued and curious and initially watched from the doorway then became fully engaged and watched the whole performance inside the hall. At the end he was smiling, saying how much he had enjoyed the performance and how he related to the central puppet character, Paul.

When I returned to the school three months later, Trent was keen to speak with me. He spoke confidently and said he was pleased to see me again and asked if I remembered how the play made him happy. Smiling throughout, he told me ‘Seeing *The Boy Who Climbed into the Moon* changed me…I’m so more confident, I’m not scared anymore… I don’t have nightmares anymore …I sleep better… (talking to the girl next to him). I’m different- aren’t I, Lisa?’ Trent told me how he used to be terrified by his phobia of puppets and masks, and often could not sleep due to nightmares, but since the performance he had slept well which had helped him in school. Lisa, his friend, confirmed Trent’s story. He explained how he had engaged positively with the puppet Paul, believing ‘he was a normal boy…like me. He overcame his fears… and so have I. That’s what I have done’. Trent recalled his emotional journey from his fears before seeing the performance, his anxiety during the performance, the elation he felt after the performance and how he kept talking and thinking about the performance.

Obviously, the affect of the ‘one-off’, 55-minute performance, is not as dramatic for all children as for Trent. Throughout my research, I uncovered other accounts from children and teachers of emotional impact of the performance. This included children identifying with the central character, Paul’s reluctance to go to school, gaining resilience and overcoming inner fear. Paul is an unexpected role model for some children. Children also spoke about another character’s depression and mood swings, recognising and empathising with his feelings, both in their family situations and occasionally in themselves.

Using a mixed method approach field-study evidence over three years with three different case-study productions has shown that watching a performance is ‘a good thing’, having positive impact on children’s mood and emotional development. Watching performances exposed the children to a range of conflicting emotions which, being in a school context, provided opportunity for children to experience and understand intense and difficult emotions in a ‘safe’ space. Due to a powerful script and high-quality production elements, children watching a Theatre Alibi performance often reported experiencing strong emotional attachment to characters and their predicament allowing them to connect the performance with their own lives, commenting: ‘I was sad when the man was ill, because my mum has been ill’ – or ‘My grandad had a heart attack’ or ‘I thought about my sister who left home after a row with my step-dad… I miss her’. Exposing children to a wide range of emotions within a performance, which they can witness and assimilate, provides an opportunity for the children to develop their emotional literacy and build emotional resilience through the actors modelling and mediating the emotional content.

The impact of a theatre performance for some children can be transient, lasting not a great deal longer than the performance itself, but for others the impact is far more long-lasting but often untold. Through my PhD research I have been able to uncover the true value and importance of theatre performance on children.

Dr. Elaine Faull

**Biography**

Elaine Faull has recently been awarded her Doctorate from Exeter University. Her PhD, *The Impact of Theatre Performance in a school-setting on Children’s Learning*, focusses on the impact of Theatre Alibi’s school-based performances on children over a 3 year period between 2016-2019. A discussion of her work on the memory of a performance will be featured in the Routledge *Companion to Audiences and Performance* which is scheduled to be published in Spring 2021

For further information on her research please email: [elf216@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:elf216@exeter.ac.uk).